GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH EXPERIENCES OF HOMOPHOBIA IN SOUTH AFRICAN SECONDARY EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

In post-Apartheid South Africa, the tenets of inclusivity, non-discimination and tolerance are actively encouraged and legislated across all sectors of society, including education. However, in examining the coming out experiences of 18 South African gay and lesbian youth, it became apparent that they had all experienced discrimination, isolation and non-tolerance within their high school contexts. Due to the marginalised nature of the participants, a variety of non-purposive sampling techniques were utilised. Following a grand tour question, the researcher adopted Tesch's model of qualitative analysis. This paper provides insights into the homophobic incidents and experiences as articulated by this sample of sexual minority youth group. Responses from participants resulted in the identification of various themes relating to homophobia in the school environment, namely, peer harassment, harassment inflicted by teachers and school administrators, ineffective school counselors; avoidance, rejection and isolation; and a lack of information and curriculum in high schools for gay and lesbian youth. Implications for practice (educators, social workers, mental health professionals etc) will also be considered.

KEYWORDS. Gay, lesbian, youth, homophobia, South Africa, secondary education, internalised homophobia, coming out, social work

The experience of being young and gay or lesbian has been seriously neglected in multi-disciplinary adolescent research and service provision in South Africa. The gay liberation movement, the protection of sexual orientation granted in the new Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), and the consequent reality that teenagers currently identify themselves as homosexual at an earlier age, have highlighted the acute needs of this disenfranchised sexual minority youth group, and provided the impetus for this research endeavor.

The goal of the study was to provide gay and lesbian youth with an opportunity to articulate their coming out narratives, and to describe the meanings and associations, which they ascribe to the task of disclosing their homosexuality. In order to achieve this, a qualitative study was conducted (1997 – 2000) to phenomenologically and contextually explore their coming out process. This paper will report on one component of the larger study, namely homophobia as experienced by this cohort of young people in South African secondary education. The common thread throughout the participants' responses in this regard was the constant negative impact of various forms of homophobia on their lives. A matter of concern in their discussion was that pervasive and intrusive homophobia had been experienced by all participants in their high school settings, with a detrimental effect on psychosocial development, classroom and family dynamics, and their education itself.

Popularised by sociologist Weinberg (1972, in DeCrescenzo, 1984) homophobia originally meant "an irrational fear of homosexual persons" (p. 15). Over the years, however, homophobia has been expanded to include disgust,

anxiety, and anger (MacDonald, 1984). It has come to be used not only to refer to the reactions of heterosexuals, but also the internalisation of negative feelings by homosexual men and women (Maylon, 1982; Sears, 1992). Furthermore homophobia can be viewed as fear and loathing towards same sex sexual partners (Eskridge, 1996; Scarce, 1997). Expressions of homophobia can range from innocuous assumptions regarding heterosexuality (Boykin, 1996) to vicious incidents of anti-gay violence (Lewin & McDevitt, 1993; Scarce, 1997). It can be expressed by children through schoolyard taunts or upheld through academia, for example the unfounded contention that homosexuality did not exist in pre-colonial Africa (Wyatt, 1997).

Attacks on gays and lesbians are by no means an unfamiliar occurrence. In recent years, violence and hostility against this sector have escalated to horrifying proportions in practically every part of the world. In Africa virulent anti-gay sentiment is seen as derivative of European colonialism (Brock, Walls & Campbell (2001), As commented by Brock et al. (2001), "In Africa however, European colonialism – from which severe economic problems of the African continent derive – provides the context and fuel for this emergent witch-hunt. Virulent homophobia, incubated in the right-wing movements of the imperialist metropoles and also an outgrowth of Africa's own indigenous patriarchal systems, is finding a home in the political agendas of desperate African leaders" (p. 4) Deacon et al. (1999) expand upon this thesis of a colonial influence by stating that "amongst Africans for example, homosexuality is branded as 'un-African' and blamed on colonialism, whereas in white society, the obsession with

competitive and physically demanding sport is coupled to strident homophobia visible in a generalised locker-room social atmosphere" (p. 166).

Remafedi (1990) contends that among all members of society, adolescents are most damaged by internalised and externalised homophobia. Sullivan and Schneider (1987, in Zere, 1992) state that homophobia has a profound impact on the lives of gay and lesbian youth. Most adolescents have heard others laughed at and taunted for being "faggots" or "dykes." As a result, they begin to fear similar humiliation or even physical violence. Most gays internalise at least some homophobic stereotypes, and some experience self-hatred resulting from their beliefs and fears about their homosexual feelings. When some adolescents attempt to share these feelings with a trusted adult, the feelings are sometimes dismissed as being "only a phase". This can result in feelings of betrayal, invalidation and humiliation for the adolescent who has taken this risk (Sullivan & Schneider, 1987; Zere, 1992).

it is critically important to further contextualise this discussion within the framework of a transforming and contemporary South Africa. The last decade has been marked as the rebirth of a democratic nation, celebrating diversity and breaking from the shackles of prejudice, discrimination and intolerance, and embracing principles of inclusivity, tolerance, and mutual understanding. Internationally, modern societies have for decades been questioning whether traditionally negative societal attitudes and behaviours towards homosexuality are morally wrong. In post-apartheid South Africa (i.e., post 1994) homophobic behaviours and attitudes are anti-constitutional, with sexual orientation being

viewed as a basic human right. As commented by Wood Wentzel (2001, in Swigonski et al., 2001), "When the new Republic of South Africa, a formerly homophobic country under apartheid, ratified its constitution, it became the first nation to incorporate sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination doctrines. Having experienced unending abuses, the framers and the people agreed that they wanted their new country to be a nation of rights" (p. 19).

However, as was the case with the eradication of apartheid, it is one thing to change the legislature of a nation, but an entirely different matter to change the hearts and minds of a population (Astbury, 1991). One can attempt to eradicate overt homophobic behaviours by the passing of laws, but covert homophobia is not easily legislated against. Anti-gay sentiment is compounded in South Africa by a strong patriarchal Christian ethic that views same-sex sexual encounters as sinful and wrong. In this context, reaction against homosexual rights are seen, for many, as upholding religious beliefs and therefore something to be proud of and actively encouraged. At a South African Triangle Project Conference Archbishop Desmond Tutu apologised on behalf of the Anglican church to members of the gay and lesbian community, by stating : "I want to say sorry to you and all the others who have been made to suffer so horribly. We in the church have a great deal to answer for". When confronted with homophobic arguments based on fundamentalist assumptions, Tutu commented "Sometimes the Bible says that these things (i.e., homosexual practices) are unnatural. But I ask: 'unnatural to whom?" He went on to contend that no true Christian could condemn people on the basis of their sexual orientation. "I support and stand

firmly with those who say 'we are as we are and don't want to apologise for that' "
(Sunday Independent, 2001.)

The religious, patriarchal, paradigm strongly influenced education in South Africa's history, and therefore education has carried a conservative legacy, which has typically been discriminatory towards minority groups. Currently, education is undergoing radical transformation in South Africa. According to Deacon et al. (1999), these "conscious attempts to transform South African education" (p. 164) were largely driven by "the legislative flagship" (p. 164) of the 1996 South African Schools Act . However, they go on to clarify that "despite the law being on the statute books, however, much remains the same within the schools themselves, where old styles of school governance and pedagogy remain intact" (p. 164).

Moving away from the authoritarian system of the past, educators are now striving to introduce equitable, learner-centered education with continuous assessment. South African education systems are now viewed as inclusive, with a strong emphasis on national unity whilst recognising cultural diversity and the individual rights of each student. Students are encouraged to become aware and be tolerant of the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups within the school context. Yet, it is within this flexible and tolerant milieu that South African gay and lesbian youth report homophobic attitudes and actions perpetrated by their fellow students and, most alarmingly, their teachers and role models within the high school context. Deacon et al. (1999) elaborate on the gap between legislative reform and the social transformation by stating strongly that "gay activists have been successful in influencing policy-makers to enshrine their

rights in law" (p. 169), and yet paradoxically "homophobia and discrimination against gays have been and remain unquestioned features of African and white schooling" (p. 169). Deacon et al. (1999) expand the paradoxical reality of implementing the South African Schools Act of 1996 in their thesis that significant dissonance exists between the legislating discourse and everyday practice, with "dangerous implications for both transformation and identity" (p. 174). The teachers in their survey express views that suggest that the harsh realities of schooling show little sign of changing.

It is against a societal backdrop of discrimination that the coming out experiences of young South Africans needs to be considered. Teenagers are self-identifying as homosexual at an earlier age than at any time in South Africa's history, and as a result, are commencing their coming out process during their early and mid-adolescent years. For many, adolescence is a confusing and troubling time, as young people try to find their identity and sense of self in the world. As adolescents spend a significant amount of time at high school, peers and teachers have a role to play in the resolution of this uncertainty. For the gay or lesbian adolescent, societal views that condemn self-identification as gay or lesbian, perpetuated in the classroom, have the potential to curb and even damage psychosocial development.

METHODOLOGY

The current paper encompasses one aspect of a larger study. The aim of the study was to explore and describe the coming out process, as well as to contextualise it within a transforming and contemporary South Africa. Due to

difficulties in accessing this youth cohort, the researcher utilised the non-probability sampling methods of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling. These methods are appropriate for this study as the predominant aim of qualitative research is not generalisability, but rather in-depth description of information-rich data. The qualitative paradigm centres around elucidating the human story from within a natural setting with few controlling variables, and is therefore less concerned with generalisability (Poggenpoel, 1998).

The criteria for inclusion of gay and lesbian youth were as follows: (a) Each participant self-identified him/herself as gay or lesbian i.e. each participant had to acknowledge his/her homosexual orientation; (b) This study adopted a broad age criterion for inclusion, namely: Young people, who self-identify as gay or lesbian, and are between the age of 16 (high school age) and 21 years, were considered for inclusion; and (c) The study included gay and lesbian youth who were currently engaged in secondary or tertiary educational pursuits, out-of-school youth, as well as youth who were presently employed. Thus, the criteria for selection did not discriminate on issues of educational and employment status.

The researcher isolated the aforementioned criteria for inclusion in the study, as it would enhance the probability that the informants would be able to comment meaningfully on the coming and process and provide valid data which in turn would be analysed into descriptive and meaningful categories (Paton, 1980; Taylor & Bogdon, 1984). The authors acknowledge the fact that other 'voices', for example teachers and school administrators, may have provided

insightful collateral information; their views were not the primary focus of this investigation. It was decided that gay and lesbian youth would be given the first opportunity to articulate their stores, and that future research endeavours would include educational and other helping practitioners.

A semi-structured interview approach, was utilised, with the researcher basing interviews around the central issue of "the coming out story".   The grand tour question consisted of "Please share with me in as much detail as possible your experience of coming out".

In order to ensure a non-leading approach in interviews, the data was taped and verbatim transcripts were scrutinised reflexively by the interviewer and a colleague trained in qualitative methodology. Any interviews deemed to be remotely leading, were not included in the central data set.   This reflexivity was essential in order to ensure that the emergent data was true to the experiences of the participants.

Tesch's (1990, in Creswell, 1994) model of content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data emerging from the study. Tesch (1990, in Creswell, 1994, p.153) states that data analysis is eclectic, as there is no "right way" to analyse qualitative data. Creswell (1994) contends that in qualitative data analysis, concurrent activities engage the attention of the researcher. These are collecting the data, sorting the data into categories, formatting the data into a coherent story or picture, and writing the qualitative text. This study employed content analysis, utilising the eight steps provided by Tesch (1990 in Creswell, 1994) to systematically analyse the data. In other words, the data was

segmented into various categories which formed the basis of the meaning of coming out for South Africa's gay and lesbian youth. This investigation was initially conducted with transcripts from eleven gay and lesbian participants. In order to ensure theoretical saturation, additional participants were added, resulting in a total of 18 participants. This paper reports on all 18 participants. The characteristics of the participants are outlined in Table 1.

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A variety of participants were accessed in an attempt to reflect the diverse cultures of South Africa. The following is a brief discussion of the sample profile characteristics pertaining to the study.

Race: Race is not being used comparatively in this context, but rather to demonstrate that gay and lesbian youth exist in all communities, in all ethnic groups and within all historically defined racial groupings in South Africa. This was undertaken to eradicate the myths and stereotypes in certain communities in South Africa who have strongly articulated the opinion that 'there are no gay or lesbian people in our culture' or 'the concept of homosexuality belongs to another culture and therefore it is not part of our culture.' In this study, the racial distribution consisted of Black ($\underline{n}$ =5), White ($\underline{n}$ =9), Coloured ($\underline{n}$=2), and Indian ($\underline{n}$=2). This was not an attempt to gain a representative sample, but rather to include gay and lesbian youth from the mosaic of racial groups which comprise South African society.

Age: The age characteristics of the sample fell within the intended parameters of the study (16-21 years).

Gender: One sample characteristic that was of concern to the researcher was that of gender, as study included a disproportionate number of males ($\underline{n}$=14) as compared to females ($\underline{n}$=4). The researcher, in conjunction with the respective gay and lesbian persons who served as gatekeepers, made a concerted effort to try and include more females in the investigation.

Education: Fifteen of the sample of gay and lesbian youth were engaged in pursuing undergraduate degrees at various tertiary institutions. This is consistent with attempting to obtain a sample who have recently (i.e. not relying on adult retrospectives for data) been exposed to support structures (or lack thereof) in secondary educational systems and institutions. It is also important to note the types of high schools sampled in this study were as diverse as the sample of gay and lesbian youth themselves. The schools ranged from a large all black school in a large rural and marginalised community of Gughulethu (Cape Town), to a racially integrated and 'liberal' school in urban Johannesburg, to an all white private school in Port Elizabeth.

Data analysis was conducted by both the researcher and an independent coder, and accruing of participants only ceased once consensus was reached regarding theoretical saturation. In order to facilitate bracketing in the qualitative process, a literature audit was conducted only after the data analysis process had been completed. This enables the researcher to compare information emerging from the participants with other research in the field, in

order to ascertain similarities and differences, and to identify any unique findings that may have emanated from the study data.

Content analysis revealed five central themes, namely: the emotions experienced by the participants and the subsequent coping strategies adopted in managing their emotions; a proposed theory of the stages of the coming out process; the support structures which facilitated this process; hindrance factors and multiple levels of homophobia; as well as recommendations suggested by the participants with regards to strategies that would enable an easier transition through the developmental task of coming out. Due to the extensive scope of the emergent data, it is not viable to discuss all results in a single paper. The focus of the current paper is therefore on one sub - category (i.e., the experience of homophobia in South African secondary education) of one of the central themes (i.e., participants' experiences of homophobia). The findings based on the experiences of the research participants, with reference to their experiences of homophobia within the South African secondary education system, will now be discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings in the current study, are strongly reminiscent of Telljohann and Price's (1993) study. When they asked learners "What have been the biggest problems you have faced in school concerning your homosexual orientation?", 71% of the females reported that they had experienced rude comments, jokes, discrimination, harassment, profanities written on lockers, violence from peers, threats from some parents, loneliness and fear. Whereas 73% of the males

reported that their problems often included experiencing verbal 'put downs', threats of physical violence, physical abuse, and feeling that there was no one to turn to or trust.

Participants in the current study reported experiencing various forms of homophobia in South African secondary education. The following sub-themes emerged from data analysis: school environment; peer harassment; harassment in the form of homophobia inflicted by teachers and school administrators; school counsellors; feelings of being avoided/rejected/isolated; lack of information and curriculum content. In the discussion of the sub-themes, direct quotations from participants will be identified in italics.

School environment

International research has demonstrated that homophobia exists in schools in a way that is predictable and systematically damaging (for example, Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995; Rivers, 1999; Rivers, 2000). These findings were echoed by participants in the current study, as they reported that their school environment, in its broadest context, was not a fostering or accepting environment for pupils with a non-heterosexual orientation. They were made to feel that their homosexuality was *"wrong",* and that the school philosophy was entrenched in conservative and stereotypical educational practices.

> *"It's very rural. Okay. Also it was a very Afrikaans, conservative school. All-white school. Until the time that I left. So that wasn't really a fostering environment that you'd expect."* [gay participant]

"You see I could not ever come out in high school because people had this perception that being gay was wrong. And [home town] *is a big farming community and most of the children there get taught that 'You will be a man and all this macho stuff'. And that just made it very difficult."* [gay participant]

Research in the South African context has confirmed these perceptions. According to Deacon et al. (1999), homophobia and discrimination against gay youth continue to be 'unquestioned features' of South African schools.

Another participant spoke about the contradictions he experienced from the school system by saying:

"This whole attitude in school, especially in high school from education and from doctrine's point of view it's hectic because it's not allowed - it's not right - but then with your friends you're totally different, so you've got these two substances it's called - the one that supports and the one that hinders ..."

The participants remarked that their schools were homophobic in the broadest possible context and that their homosexuality was scorned. Furthermore, they noted that various forms of harassment seemed to be acceptable to school administrators. Within this environment, gay and lesbian youth may feel that the safest option is not to disclose their sexuality. The following two excerpts attest to this:

"I was in an all-girls private school. It was very homophobic so I was very suppressed. /... It was definitely scorned." [lesbian participant]

"In the school system, I mean just mentioning it ... no-one ever talks

about homosexuals - they are always making these jokes and stuff and

saying ... telling jokes to people / … you know like 'fags' and that …"

[gay participant]

Further evidence of homophobia was reported by the participants in their references to the fact that homosexuality was viewed as a taboo subject and not allowed to be discussed in schools. As two participants said:

"It was … bilingual, which was like mostly conservative Afrikaner kids

and everybody, so it was just completely taboo. Homosexuality was

like not the thing to talk about." [gay participant]

"… I was in an all-boys school, so can you imagine the gay issue never

came out, never discussed openly, I mean." [gay participant]

Norton (1980) supports this in stating that, in most schools, the presence of homosexuals among the school population is denied. Tartangi (1978) adds that, in most public schools and communities, homosexuality is still a forbidden subject. Although the aforementioned remarks were made by authors 20 years or so ago, the research participants in this study consistently reported that, in their schools, gay and lesbian youth simply 'did not exist'. It appears that school systems provide a microcosm of the broader social view in South Africa, in that the 2001 Census was accused of rendering gays and lesbians invisible. A national newspaper (Sunday Times, 21 October, 2001) reported that STATISTICS South Africa had apologised to South African gays and lesbians after being accused of discriminating against same-sex couples in Census 2001.

This resulted from complaints by gays and lesbians to the Human Rights Commission, charging Census 2001 with "rendering lesbian and gay couples invisible". In the school context, this social exclusion serves to reinforce these adolescents' already increasing sense of invisibility. As one participant explained:

> *"I think the high school systems doesn't think about it, I don't think that they realise that there are gay students in the high schools. It's a misnomer that people don't really want to accept it, and by that stage most of them think that if there is anything it's confusion, sexual confusion, sexual experimentation, get them, get them psychotheraputerised."* [gay participant]

This enforced invisibility has also been encountered in research findings emanating from work with gay and lesbian youth in USA (e.g., Hunter & Schaecher, 1995) and UK (e.g., Rivers, 2000).

Peer harassment

Almost every participant in this study reported daily incidents of verbal harassment by their school peers, throughout their time in high school. The participants articulated the pain, humiliation and fear that this constant barrage of derogatory epithets had on their sense of self, and within the context of their coming out, as follows:

> *"Well, ever since that I have never been the same. And when I was crying I could hear people saying: 'Look, he is crying.' And then since that experience there was this other guy who would come up to me and said:* [name of participant] *you are a faggot, aren't you? What is it like*

to be a faggot?' And he would say it in front of everyone. And if I was sitting at a table with other people and he got sent there he would say: 'I don't want to sit with these faggots'." [gay participant]

"Well, I have been criticised and been called a 'faggot' so much, I don't know. Whenever I hear that word faggot it strikes fear into my heart. I start getting nervous. When I hear that name I feel like everyone knows about me. I can just feel that people are pointing fingers. Or saying something about me." [gay participant]

"I mean, like, when you are growing older that sticks inside. They called me 'moffie', 'moffie' the whole time. And you start to wonder, 'Is it really like that? Am I different? Am I really what they want to classify as 'moffie'?" [1] [gay participant]

"I wasn't the sporty type or the ... the popular type. You know, I'd just sit on the side with a small group of friends ... and ... just a comment every now and again: 'You little girly', or 'you little sissy' or whatever, like that. That was hard." [gay participant]

A participant commented that this constant barrage of insults and humiliation had made him "hard".

"Also through standard six, seven and eight [South African education system, year 8, roughly 13 - 17 years of age] *the whole time the boys would call you 'moffie' or pass remarks. Through my whole life it has been like that. / … With time you just get hard."* [gay participant]

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[1] moffie is a South African colloquial, derogatory term implying a male with overtly effeminate characteristics - roughly equivalent to the English 'poof'

One of the participants profoundly felt the effects of derogatory labelling, and described it as being under a multitude of spotlights simultaneously:

> *" … there was this one guy and he was talking to someone else and then he looked at me and then he said 'He's a fucking gay'. And that just hit ... I just felt like ten million spotlights just shone in my face."* [gay participant]

For the adolescent struggling with a sense of undefined "differentness" regarding the focus of his or her sexual attractions, traditional avenues and resources for sexual identity clarification and healthy formation are frequently unavailable at best. More likely, however, they present a negative and stigmatising backdrop against which the adolescent must explore feelings and thoughts about this highly personal and integral aspect of personal identity. In schools, it is commonplace for students to routinely apply the words "faggot", "gay", "dyke", or "queer" to anyone they dislike for any reason, highlighting the devaluing of anything associated with being gay (Fontaine & Hammond, 1996).

Perhaps one of the most disturbing references came from one participant who explained that this constant verbal harassment resulted in his achieving less than he felt he could have. He said:

> *"That made me less confident in myself. It is like that is what made me, … a bit shy, not wanting to go play with other people because I was scared of things. I think that I could have achieved more in my young age. But it kept me back because I was afraid of doing what I wanted to do because I did not want to be humiliated in front of people, you know.*

> */ … from previous experience I know that they are going to call me*
>
> *'moffie.' So I rather leave it, spare yourself."* [gay participant]

Peer harassment is particularly problematic for gay and lesbian youth. Given that much of it occurs in school, the consequences include a range of academic difficulties. These difficulties have been noted both anecdotally and in systematic research (Travers & Schneider, 1996).

As stated previously, one participant reported being a victim of physical abuse. He felt that it was a direct result of his homosexuality, and recalled it as follows:

> *"I remember in Standard Nine we were playing ... touch rugby on the field and it was like play-play[2], and then this one guy came up and he actually tackled me. It was TOUCH rugby.[3] And I couldn't believe it. My jaw - I could just feel the ground ... And I was crying that whole day. And I told him 'Ja, thanks for doing this but I wish something like that happens to you' and that same afternoon at rugby practice he broke his collar bone."* [gay participant]

The ever-present threat of verbal and physical abuse can be very stressful for gay and lesbian youth in the school situation. Due to legal requirements of school attendance, they provide as it were a 'captive' audience for homophobic bullies in these contexts. Most gay youngsters, however, remain in mainstream

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[2] 'play-play' is a South African term meaning 'pretend'

[3] 'touch rugby' is a gentler form of the sport rugby, which does not allow tackling or aggressive physicality.

settings. They are often harassed and even sometimes physically attacked in these school settings (Taylor, 1994).

As a result of the numerous illustrations of harassment reported in this discussion, it should come as no surprise that participants disclosed that they had great difficulty in "fitting in" with their peer group at school. Participants reported trying to fit in [*"tried to fit in the best you could"*], but despite their efforts there was a perennial feeling of having *"something wrong with you".* Feelings of being different were fuelled by rumours, gossiping, name calling and exclusion from social activities.

Harassment inflicted by teachers and school administrators

Numerous participants reported that not only were their peers perpetrators of verbal harassment, but more alarmingly their teachers were responsible for similar acts of homophobia. While the negative impact of verbal harassment by school peers cannot be underestimated, at least it can be explained in terms of adolescent "bravado" or the adage "children can be cruel." The reported incidents of harassment by teachers are worrying. Racist or sexist comments would have far-reaching consequences for teachers in international teaching contexts, and especially in contemporary South African post-Apartheid society. However, for the participants in this study, it was commonplace for teachers to pass derogatory and homophobic remarks about gay and lesbian youth. This supports Deacon et al.'s (1999) contention of the gap between law and practice in South African schools.

The following excerpts from the interviews with the research participants eloquently articulate the levels of homophobia and verbal abuse experienced at the hands of teachers. Their commentary also illustrates the erosive impact that these homophobic acts had on the lives of the participants. One participant had been outed in a humiliating fashion by a peer in a class room context in which a teacher openly ridiculed gay people:

"Well, there is this one teacher in [high school name] *he is so against gay people and he is always criticising gay people openly in class. / … Like he will say: 'What did that faggot Shakespeare do?' and stuff like that. And everyone would laugh, so I laughed as well, because I had to laugh along. And this same teacher I was in standard seven[4] and I had this experience. I just wanted to die. We were sitting in maths. He still takes me for maths this year. Terrible. There were two girls kinda messing around in class so he started saying: 'Are you two lesbians or something?' And then they started laughing and then this other guy like sitting behind me he said in front of the whole class: 'There are not only lesbians in the class sir but there is also a gay guy.' Immediately when I heard that I turned around to look at him because I just knew, I felt the heat on me. And then he goes, 'It* is [name of participant]*'. Fuck I swore at him so badly. This was in front of the whole class. He said it again and I was in the front row and I just burst into tears."* [gay participant]

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[4] South African educational system, year 9, approximately 14 - 16 years of age

Other participants had felt publicly humiliated following teachers making derogatory comments about their sexual orientation, especially when this was supported by their peers. This left them feeling vulnerable and afraid.

> *"Like a teacher would say something derogatory about being gay. I would feel… it would hit me hard. It would like hit a vein in me. And the whole class was supporting her. And I felt how am I, all by myself, going to stand up against the whole class, and the teacher, who should know better."* [gay participant]

Participants felt that harassment by teachers resulted in an inability to be openly gay in their school context.

> *"But if it was not for him then I would probably be more out. Sometimes when I am in a bad mood and I say to myself that if that bloody maths teacher says one thing I am going to turn around and say 'You know people who criticise gay people are actually having more gay feelings than us gay people'. High school. Being criticised and mocked in school and that is really my downfall."* [gay participant]
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> *" As far as I was concerned it ruined my whole life at* [name of high school].*"* [gay participant]

A participant reported on two gay friends from his school who had committed suicide. This participant felt strongly that, when the headmaster threatened to expel his friends because of their sexual orientation, their fear led to them taking their own lives. In the words of the participant:

"It was so sad. The whole thing why they did it was because the headmaster told them that they would not have people like this in their school. And I will expel you if it ever happens again. And threats like that. It is totally ludicrous." [gay participant]

While it cannot be deduced from this quotation that the head teacher was directly responsible for the suicides of these young people, suicidal ideation and mental health issues resulting from homophobic abuse at school have been reported in research (for example, Rivers, 1995, 1997, 2000). Rivers (1995) has noted that gay and lesbian youths who experience victimisation in the school setting are at risk for suicidal and parasuicidal behaviours. Hershberger and D'Augelli (1995, in Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001) note that these young people typically experience mental health problems. It is a matter of concern that young people could be exposed to such far reaching levels of homophobia in what should be a safe environment. Teachers and administrators in secondary education environments need to become cognisant that homophobic ignorance can have irreversible, and even deadly, consequences for gay and lesbian youth. Although none of the participants in this study mentioned physical abuse resulting from homophobia, international research notes that gay and lesbian youth have experienced such abuse at the hands of their teachers (Rivers, 1999, 2000; Carragher & Rivers, 2002).

Participants reported that teachers and principals were often non-supportive. They often found that teachers were a hindrance rather than fulfilling one of their primary roles of supporting their pupils. The researchers would have

liked to report on some supportive staff and pupils in the school context, however such positive examples were not forthcoming from participants. The following quotations from the interviews expand on this experience:

> *"… at school you don't have the support system. / … I can't say I'm gay exactly. And then ... going* [on] *about 'Ja, he's gay. We better watch out for him when we go to the gents room'."* [gay participant]

> *"The support structures aren't there, you're young, you don't know necessarily what you are. If you do, that's good, but generally you will be thrown, you won't have the mature support systems, you won't, you won't get into the norm the normality of it. It will be difficult for you."* [gay participant]

One participant expressed that teachers had the potential to be a much needed support system to gay and lesbian youth in the school context. He felt that this support system would give a young person the confidence to be 'out' at school.

> *"What would maybe happen if somebody more mature, teachers, would approach him if they knew and give him support, uhm, they talk to him. I think the teachers could be a support group, I think maybe the guidance counsellor would be the support group, he would definitely get involved and, and it would maybe be a, a easy transition."* [gay participant]

Due to fears by educators about "promoting homosexuality" in the high school context, gay and lesbian youth are typically denied access to accurate

and comprehensive information about human sexuality and alternative life-styles in school. Similarly, teachers, counsellors and school administrators also lack information regarding homosexuality, resulting in a lack of understanding of gay and lesbian issues. Teachers can be just as guilty as learners of emotionally abusing gay and lesbian adolescents, and may fail to intervene or take a stance when gay youth are physically and emotionally abused by their peers. By tolerating such behaviour, the school fails to educate its learners about homophobia and homophobic violence . In order to effectively tackle this problem both teachers and students need to be educated, and take the risk of confronting their prejudices. By including positive references to gay and lesbian issues within relevant classes, teachers could contribute towards stereotype reduction within the school context.

The participants felt that if teachers were open and honest about their own sexual orientation, it would be easier for young people to come out in the school context. It was felt that homosexual teachers who hide their sexual orientation contribute to the feelings of isolation and invisibility experienced by these young people. As one participant explained:

> *"The thing was that I was aware of a few gay teachers. No, they were not out. You know when you are gay you know when someone else is gay. And no matter how much they hide you still see it. It is the kind of thing we did not talk about. They could have other kids in high school, who were definitely gay. That's the whole thing. Because you sit in your*

classroom with this ultra straight teacher who says things that really

hurt you, and you have no one to turn to." [gay participant]

It is undoubtedly risky for gay or lesbian staff to come out to their colleagues and the student body. However, should they be prepared to take that risk, their openness could provide a role model of behaviour for homosexual and heterosexual staff and students alike.   This would provide an invaluable source of support for young people grappling with their sexual orientation.

School counsellors

Within the South African education system, school counsellors and guidance teachers are typically teachers who have carried psychology or social work as an additional credit. They may therefore have a generalist understanding of counselling skills, but few have any direct specialist training or experience in dealing with gay and lesbian issues. Research participants stated clearly that they found guidance counsellors (and guidance classes) in their schools to be a waste of time, a joke, or just an opportunity for free time.

> "*The guidance teachers are very much a waste in school. They're used*
>
> *to everything besides guidance. And maybe once a month they give*
>
> *you some guidance. Okay that's the first problem. They say go and*
>
> *chalk the cricket field."* [gay participant]
>
> "*We had a guidance counsellor. But the guidance period was usually*
>
> *perceived as a joke."* [gay participant]
>
> "*Well, I think that guidance teachers for example are a waste of time*
>
> *especially a waste of my time."* [gay participant]

Learners spoke at length about the difficulty they faced in school as a result of the negative attitudes of educators (Sears, 1987; Sears, 1992). Most commented that the subject of homosexuality was simply avoided by teachers, counsellors and administrators in their school. They viewed guidance counsellors, in particular, as academic not personal advisers. This finding is disappointing, when considering that the National Ministry of Education has, over the past few years, invested enormous resources in the transforming paradigm towards Outcomes Based Education methods as well as development of a Life Skills Training approach to primary, secondary, and tertiary education in South Africa.

Participants reported that counsellors were more of a hindrance than a support when approached for individual counselling. They said they did not feel comfortable with school counsellors, that they tended to moralise personal problems, and that they were perceived as being ineffective and useless. Participants had the following to say in this regard:

> *"… we didn't feel comfortable talking anonymously to someone like that. / … it was always weird to speak to somebody I didn't really know."*
>
> *"I tried that and it didn't work. The guidance counsellor was straight, married etc. Female. She said 'a phase'. / … I had already gotten that from my mother. She said I was 'going through an identity crisis'. So I said: 'I know who I am, it's not an identity crisis. I know who I am and that is why I am telling you this.' So I just stopped going to see her. It was useless."* [gay participant]

"… the mistake that people make is that they believe that psychologists and guidance teachers know everything but the fact is that they … are … making mistakes. I would rather go to a close friend than go to a person who considers themselves more experienced than myself on an issue that they know nothing about. I mean seriously, how many guidance teachers know anything about what it means to be a gay teenager?" [gay participant]

"The only ... like our counsellor at school was like this really conservative woman. She wouldn't like ... if you came to her and you said you had a drinking problem, she would probably send you off to church." [gay participant]

The aforementioned views are supported in the literature, as numerous authors have reported that school counsellors and helping professionals may be uncomfortable with homosexuals due to pressure from a homophobic society and school context (for example, Gramick, 1988; Plummer, 1989). Concerned professionals may include school counsellors, school nurses, teachers and physicians. Unfortunately, schools are often another place where adolescents face rejection. For example, 41% of school counsellors recently surveyed indicated that schools were not doing enough to help homosexual adolescents adjust to their school environment (Telljohann & Price, 1993). In addition, only 21% of the counsellors said it would be professionally gratifying to counsel homosexual students about gay issues, while 26% of the counsellors surveyed agreed that teachers exhibit prejudice towards homosexual students. Thus, the

traditional areas of support for heterosexual students, peers, family and school, are often not available to most gay youths. According to Cowie and Rivers (2000), those providing support to gays and lesbians need to understand the "impact of social influences upon the individual", have respect for diversity, and provide "unconditional affirmative support" (p. 510). This would require adequate training in the field, and personal experience of stereotype reduction.

Avoided/rejected/isolated

While experiences of being avoided, rejected and isolated have been referred to throughout this paper thus far, it bears repeating in this discussion. Participants reported experiencing these feelings most acutely during their high school careers. Their experiences of being avoided, rejected and isolated in high school served to perpetuate their low self-esteem, and often result in their decision to put their coming out "on hold" until they feel more comfortable with their sexuality. The following quotations bear witness to these experiences.

"The fact that I felt totally out, and that there wasn't anyone I could talk to and that I felt very out." [gay participant]

"Well, as you know children are the cruellest people on earth. So people that I thought were my friends would just totally disregard me, in every aspect of their lives. /…I only understood at a much later date why they were avoiding me all the time. They were uncomfortable around me and I just accepted it. I had to accept it. There was nothing I could do about it. But at that age, it was very difficult. Very difficult. I don't know I just felt very alone. Almost like I isolated myself I used to

block myself off from areas of my life where I thought that it might show that I am gay. Like I wouldn't like to play games with them or watch TV or things like that. I was always very, very secluded." [gay participant]

"I felt that people were avoiding me and I could not understand why this was happening to me. Why are they avoiding me now all of a sudden? And then I realised that people are starting to suspect that I am gay. And they are seeing the friends I am going around with. They are gay and they suspect that I am also gay. It was scary and very hectic. Very, very hectic. / … That affected me a lot. It was becoming a big fat joke at school. Whenever I would pass by they would just laugh. And then whenever I walked into class they would look at me and start laughing. It was very terrible." [gay participant]

Gay adolescents internalise the negative images of homosexuality presented by schools, peers, family, and society very early in their development . They realise that openness about their sexual orientation is likely to bring physical, verbal and emotional abuse; rejection by family and/or friends; discrimination; and religious condemnation (Remafedi, 1987). Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) describe this psychological dilemma as, one the one hand feeling isolated by non-disclosure and, on the other hand, fearing victimisation if they come out.

Lack of information and curriculum content

A more subtle form of homophobia is the overwhelming lack of gay and lesbian literature and information in high school settings. Participants reported

that they had great difficulty obtaining accurate information, or any information for that matter, on the topic of homosexuality in their school libraries. In similar vein, they expressed a complete lack of curriculum content regarding alternative lifestyles. This may be another mechanism employed to reinforce the "belief" that gay and lesbian youth do not exist in South African high schools. Participants offered the following references to this issue:

> " … *recently I've been trying to look up some book* [regarding homosexuality] *in the library, you know that there's nothing."* [gay participant]

> *"... they wouldn't have like serious discussions on homosexuality."* [gay participant]

Plummer (1989) confirms this finding in his study on gay and lesbian youth in England: The most cursory look at school curricula in England makes it clear that whereas information regarding standard gender relations are reproduced (Deem, 1980; Stansworth, 1983), issues around same-gender experiences are typically excluded. English studies ignore the homo-erotic influences on Shakespeare, Wilde or Woolf, and historical studies will ignore the new "gay history". It is not a total exclusion, but in one London study only 35 participants (out of 416) found that homosexuality was talked about at schools in ways they found helpful, and 60% said it was avoided completely (Trenchard & Warren, 1984). Of the remaining 40%, 80 said they did not find the mention helpful.

For the child who has no close peer relationships, the internalisation of a positive ego-ideal can be facilitated through literature. Unfortunately, that

literature is not generally available to them in their schools or public libraries.

The current censorship campaign mobilised by conservative religious ideologues

stands to illustrate the campaign of oblivion that confronts these youths' search

for self-definition and meaning (Jackson & Sullivan, 1994).

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Educators serve as role models to the students they teach. Current

legislation in South Africa recognises the rights of gay and lesbian people,

however it appears that the education system has been negligent in enforcing

this legislation within the school context. It is important that educators themselves

are educated regarding the rights of their gay and lesbian learners, and how their

prejudice impacts on these young people's lives. Positive changes in this regard

will not happen overnight. However, it is an issue which needs to be addressed

in curriculum development, training and practice. The following are

recommendations forwarded by gay and lesbian youth in this study, in terms of

improving the educational experience for themselves and other cohorts of sexual

minority youth.

Curriculum

Epstein (2000) states from her research that "homophobia is the real

Cinderella of abusive behaviour. There is consensus about what you do about

racism. That's perceived as bad and just not tolerated. Sexism isn't tolerated

either, but with homophobia, even schools who really want to do something don't

know what to do" (p. 66). Although Epstein's comments relate to her studies of

homophobia in high schools in the United Kingdom, her observations aptly

encapsulate the challenges facing secondary education in contemporary South Africa.

Various recommendations were made by the participants in terms of curriculum changes and modifications. A common theme was the need to include education regarding homosexuality in the existing curriculum dealing with sexuality and sexuality education. They were not suggesting that a separate curriculum be developed for the subject of homosexuality, but rather an inclusive method of teaching. This inclusive curriculum could help gay and lesbian youth feel an integral, equal and accepted part of their school networks. Such inclusion would reduce the pervasive feelings of isolation, which these young people report.

The participants also recommended that sexual orientation should be included within the ambit of all life skills training, as videos and small group discussions would be more amenable to open and comfortable discourse and debate amongst school learners. South African educators could adopt and adapt curricula that have been formulated and implemented in other countries, ensuring that it is relevant to a South African context. For example, the United States Education Department (US Department of Social Welfare, 1996) propsoed a curriculum in which the teaching objectives were to provide students with a basic understanding of different sexual behaviours in society; to develop students' skills in analysing sex-related issues put forward by the media; and to cultivate correct attitudes of accepting the rights of individuals to have different values in society.

Participants also expressed a need to develop a curriculum within schools, which celebrates differentness and diversity, and in so doing to address the contradictions that school systems have posed to gay and lesbian youth regarding homosexuality. It falls on educators to create a co-operative learning environment, where students are safe to express themselves in all their diversity. South African educators have made progress towards ensuring that the experiences and history of one group of students do not dominate curriculum content. However, this has predominantly focussed on removing racist and sexist content, and the discussion of the effects of racism and sexism in society. If gay and lesbian young people are ever going to feel included and comfortable in the school context, then gay and lesbian issues need to 'normalised' within the classroom. It needs to become appropriate and normal to speak about gay and lesbian role models, and to address gay and lesbian themes emerging in literature etc.

 In this context, South Africa could learn from recent initiatives in the United Kingdom. In a sex education information leaflet (published in July, 2000) the needs of gay school students were recognised for the very first time (McLean, 2002). The challenge for South African secondary education is further reflected by McLean (2002), in that "it is up to schools to make sure that the needs of all pupils are met in their programmes. Young people, whatever their developing sexuality, need to feel that sex and relationship education is relevant to them and sensitive to their needs" (p. 67).

Given that numerous participants reported that verbal harassment began early in their primary schools, they suggested that education regarding tolerance of alternative lifestyles should commence at the primary school level. In elementary and high schools, where attendance is compulsory, the need to ensure a safe setting for all students, including homosexual youth, is especially compelling (Taylor, 1994).

Support groups

Numerous participants felt that support groups within school environments would serve as a positive means of addressing their sense of isolation and hidden identities. By recognising that gay and lesbian students exist in South African schools, and have a right to accurate information about homosexuality, school professionals can create an atmosphere of acceptance and support. Such efforts also can address the serious problems that many youth face, including substance abuse, depression, failure to complete high school, suicide, or HIV transmission. Support groups and peer education groups can be life-saving for gay and lesbian teens and can assist them in affirming a positive identity.

Access to accurate information

The recommendation from the participants was not only to have information made available to the participants, but to ensure that it was easily accessible and accurate. It would be redundant and counterproductive to provide information regarding homosexuality which was either outdated or conveying a heterosexist bias. School professionals can make available pamphlets for

programmes designed for gay and lesbian students, such as social/support groups, and distribute these to students in clinics, libraries, or classrooms

Dispel myths and stereotypes regarding homosexuality

The participants proposed that an effort should be made to dispel myths and stereotypes about homosexuality. Homosexuality should be addressed in school sex-educationclasses, AIDS-prevention programmes, and health care environments. Misconceptions and stereotypes regarding homosexuality need to be discussed openly and discarded. It was suggested that school systems should propagate the notion that gay and lesbian youth are not significantly different from their heterosexual peers. The researcher notes that this suggestion is in line with a consistent theme, which was the need for the participants to have their sexuality normalised within the context of their peer networks.

Furthermore, participants reported that their coming out processes would have been made easier if gay and lesbian teachers in their schools were granted permission to be 'out' (disclosing their sexual orientation openly). They explained that having open-same orientation teachers would have been supportive in being able to identify with someone who understood what they, as young teenagers, were struggling to come to terms with.

Zero tolerance for homophobia and prejudice

Given the discussion pertaining to homophobia in secondary education institutions, it would seem evident that the participants would advocate a culture of zero tolerance in high schools. Their consistent reporting of homophobia

stresses the fact that these participants want to ensure that other sexual minority youth do not have to encounter similar acts of homophobia in their coming out. Homophobic attacks (verbal and physical) need to be recognised as bullying, and appropriate action needs to be taken against the perpetrators. If schools are not seen to take a stance against homophobic bullying, it will continue to escalate.

Participants recommended that homophobia be treated with the same severity as issues of racism and sexism. They also supported developing a culture in which all school learners are taught that "it is okay to be gay". In order to end lesbian and gay discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools, appropriate sanctions need to be implemented. These sanctions should be enforced for students, teachers and administrative personnel alike. Schools need to assume a critical stance in educating students about acceptance of and tolerance for those who are different from the majority, including gay and lesbian individuals (Morrow, 1993).

The participants also suggested that legal protection should be instituted to protect their rights in schools, especially in response to the various manifestations of homophobia and discrimination. Safety at school has become a grave problem for all students with the increasing presence of weapons and gangs in many South African schools. In light of this, Sears (1987:93) makes the following statement: "As professional educators, regardless of our moral or political convictions, we are duty bound to protect and promote the human and civil rights of all people within the classroom." It is poignant to note that Sears

made this commentary in 1987, and it is still relevant to an educational context in a developing South Africa in 2002.

Train teachers and counsellors

It would be unthinkable for an educator to make racist or sexist remarks in the present day South African classroom context. Yet, gay and lesbian young people report teachers making homophobic discriminatory comments on an alarmingly ongoing basis. It would be advisable for stereotype reduction training to be introduced as mandatory for educators - either as part of their training or as a module in ongoing professional development. Stereotype reduction workshops could also prove effective if introduced to students at high school level.

Considering the numerous experiences of homophobia from school teachers and counsellors as highlighted by the participants, their recommendations for teacher/counsellor training on homosexuality and its impact on teenager's lives, cannot be over-emphasised. Including human sexuality (with a unit on homosexuality) as part of teacher and counsellor training programmes, could address part of this problem, Participants spoke about the urgent need to educate (or re-educate) teachers and school counsellors about diversity issues, including homosexuality. They specifically suggested training related to changing teachers' homophobic attitudes and stereotypical perceptions, and thus transforming their responsiveness from a point of fear to a place of acceptance and support. This sample of gay and lesbian youth also proposed that the National Government should demonstrate its commitment by sponsoring these teacher/counsellor-training programmes.

Counselling services

Almost every participant spoke about the issue of providing effective and more supportive counselling services for gay and lesbian youth in high schools. Gay and lesbian youth expressed how counselling services could have made the coming out experience easier for them, and in so doing demonstrating the critical need to reassess and modify the counselling programmes in high schools Counseling and mental health resources are vital, as many of the school situations call for professional attention which cannot be adequately addressed by peers (Rivers & D'Augelli, 2001). Mental health workers and school guidance counsellors have the opportunity to make a substantial positive impact on the lives of teens who are uncertain about their sexual orientation simply by conveying the reality that orientation goes beyond sexual impulse or behaviour.

The participants also proposed that lesbigay organisations join their efforts to a coalition of established and reputable NGOs, and thus provide a more eclectic range of educational services to high schools. Educators should include curricula regarding gay and lesbian issues, and organise speakers on the topic in high schools. It is further recommended that a gay and lesbian table be established during each academic year's commencement/orientation week. It was suggested that this could provide valuable information for learners who were questioning their sexuality. Ultimately this study bears testimony to this growing cohort of youth who self-identify as gay and lesbian. School counsellors need to become more aware of this fact, and render the appropriate services accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Freedom of belief is a basic human right. However, when those beliefs result in practices which hurt and threaten the lives of a minority group, it is viewed by civilised society as unacceptable. Homophobia in secondary education, as experienced by the participants in this study, not only violates constitutional rights but is also morally reprehensible. There may be various rationales that could explain why teachers and peers have behaved in this manner, however there is no adequate justification for allowing this to continue. Whilst homophobia and discrimination based on sexual orientation occurs daily in classrooms throughout the country, South African Education Authorities cannot contend that their system promotes equality and eradicates discrimination. The stories presented by participants are hard hitting and stark. There are lessons that need to be learned, and learned quickly. The school classroom is a microcosm of a much bigger reality. If children are to grow into playing effective adult roles in a democratic South African society, then the tenets of non-discrimination and tolerance need to be both taught at school and modelled by educators.

In considering the limitations of the current study, the researchers are aware that the sample size is small compared to more typical quantitative approaches. However, given that generalisability is not the aim of this study and that theoretical saturation was reached, the sample size is appropriate. Trustworthiness of data is always a concern in qualitative work. In this instance, every effort was made to ensure that interviews were not leading. The researcher

conducting the interviews was a social worker trained in qualitative research. All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Stringent reflexivity was applied to all transcripts, and any interviews that may have been construed as leading were discarded. By including an independent coder, emergence of themes and codes were verifiable. Each step was carefully documented, so that a clear audit trail was laid.

South Africa is a mosaic of cultures. Although equal numbers were obtained of white respondents and people of colour, it was not possible to ensure that equal numbers of all ethnic groups in the rainbow nation was represented. Once again, as the study is not deemed to be generalisable, this is not problematic. Qualitative research is not typically viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a starting point to further research. In this instance, one would hope that follow-up research would include a much larger sample, which was more reflective of the diverse South African population.

Results from the current study concur with findings obtained in the USA and UK. One might raise the question of what makes this study unique, if it is simply reiterating findings found elsewhere? What is interesting is that the homophobia experienced by these respondents, in South African secondary education, took place in a context and time frame which is recognised internationally as having one of the most liberal constitutions with regard to gay and lesbian rights. Furthermore, these incidents were not isolated, but took place consistently throughout high school, were perpetuated by both peers and

authority figures in education, and impacted significantly on the development of a gay or lesbian identity.

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Table 1: Sample characteristics

Characteristic	Categories	n (N = 18)
Race	White	9
	People of Colour	9
Age	16-17 yrs	2
	18-19 yrs	8
	20-21 yrs	8
Gender	Males	14
	Females	4
Education	Tertiary education	15
	Secondary education	2
	Out of school	1